MOSAICS

. . . THEN AND NOW

by LAWRENCE A. HATCH

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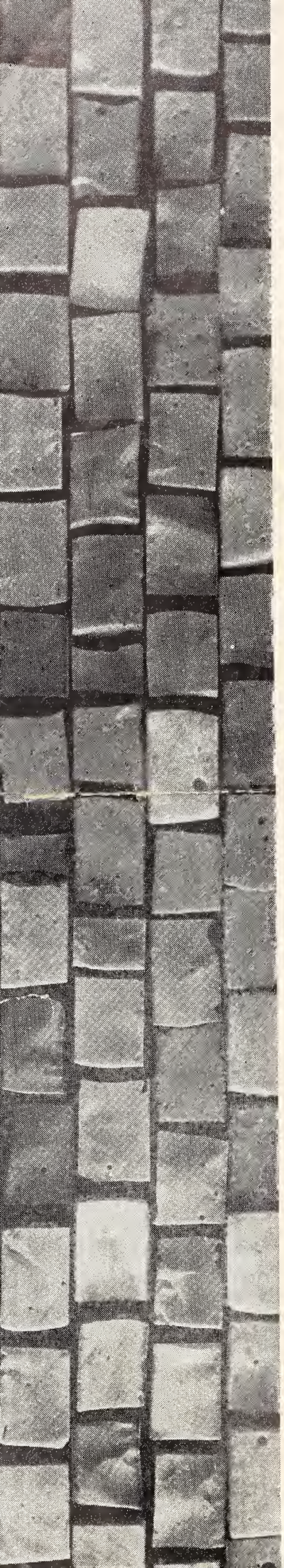
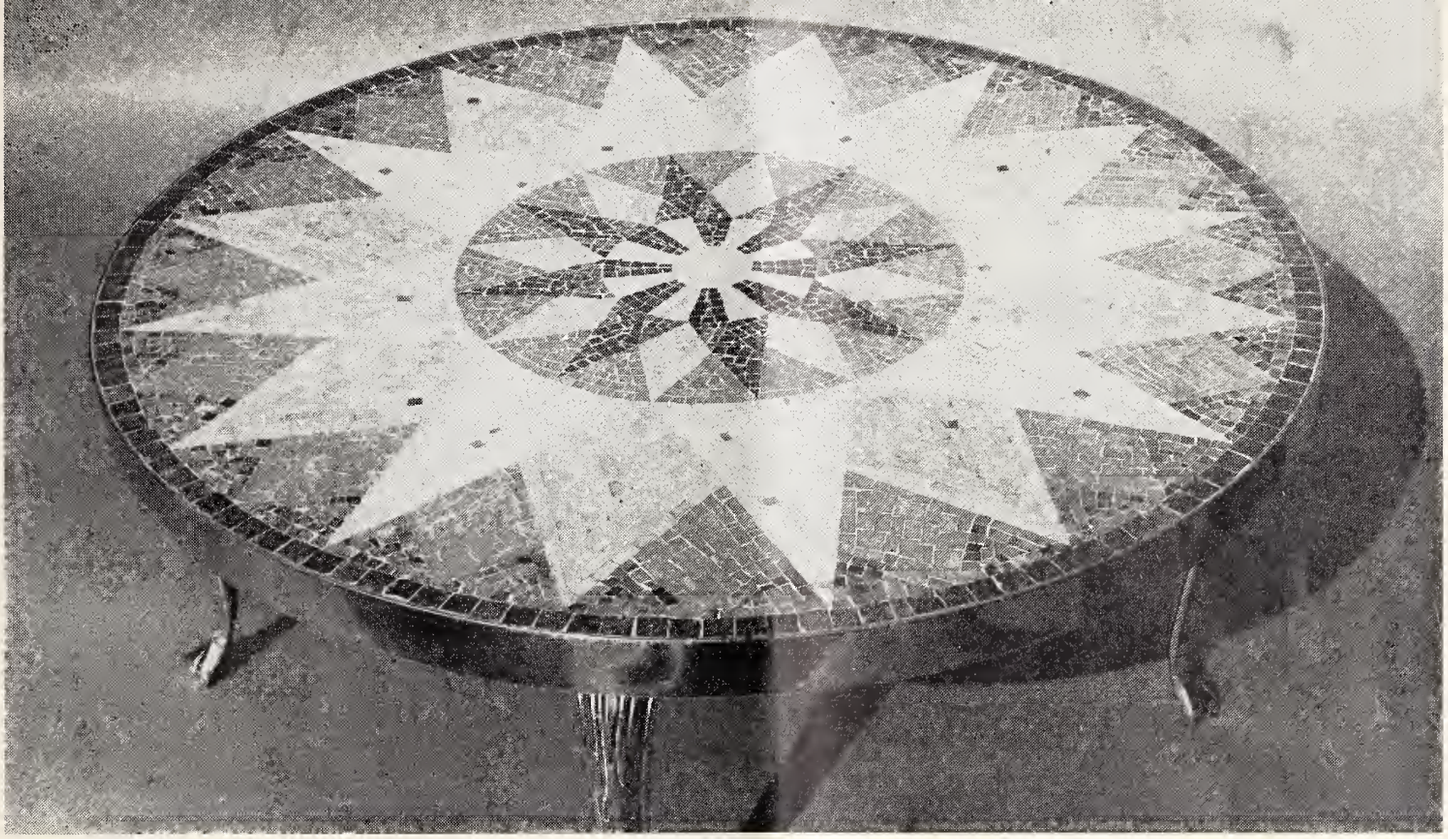


MOSAICS

Mr. Hatch, of the Department of Visual Communication of the University of California, Los Angeles, compiled the material presented in this article from the film, "The World of Mosaic," just released by the University Extension. The photographs accompanying the article, also from the film, briefly suggests its scope: A review of the major aspects of mosaic art from its early beginnings to the present. For additional information, see the "Ceram-Activities" section.

. . . THEN AND

Photographs from "The World of Mosaic"



MOSAIC TABLE, designed and made by Sylvia Rosenthal under the guidance of Los Angeles mosaicist, George Millar, is a contemporary example of an age-old art. EMPRESS THEODORA (opposite page), is an early Byzantine mosaic which was made about 547 A.D.

NOW

by LAWRENCE HATCH

CONTEMPORARY DESIGNERS, architects, interior decorators and craftsmen looking for a new art medium to relate *art* to architecture, have turned to mosaics. These colorful ceramic and glass tiles—known as tesserae—are strong and durable as well as beautiful. And, because they are resistant to weather, they can be used to beautify both exterior and interior surfaces. However, this "new" medium is anything but new. This colorful art spans some 5,000 years or more of man's history. One finds on tracing the history of mosaics, that it is as fascinating as watching an artist create an intricate mosaic mural.

The Egyptians appear to be among the first to integrate mosaics into their art. Some of their earliest methods consisted of inserting colored glass and earthenware into sinkages in tile or stone columns as well as walls. Predominant designs of these early mosaics were ornamental in character.

Like the builder and architect of our own time, artisans of the past were apparently impressed with the utilitarian qualities of mosaic. The earliest known use of the medium was as pavement and the lining in water cisterns. Then small designs and crude pictures were worked out. Remnant examples showing early Sumerian war scenes date back more than 1,000 years before Christ.

Turning to the Greeks and Romans, we find much evidence of mosaic at a high level of achievement. In Pompeii, some of the finest examples of floor mosaic are to be found, dating as early as 200 B. C.

Skills developed by Greek mosaicists were passed on to the Romans. The floors of sumptuous Roman villas and baths were covered with mosaic designs, arranged in geometric patterns ranging outward from a central medallion, which usually contained a scene of the pagan gods. It is said that during festive occasions, when a guest could no longer make out the symbol nearest him, the time had come for him to leave the party . . . usually supported or carried by his friends.

The Romans left a multitude of floor mosaics in Italy, north Africa, Syria, France, Germany and even England. However, they did not confine all of their mosaic works to floor pieces. Records indicate that they used mosaics on walls of important buildings.

In approximately the sixth century A. D., a new form of mosaic art began to take shape. Opposing the intricate detail of earlier mosaic endeavor, the Byzantine era saw the emergence of a separate concept of mosaic execution. In this period mosaicists abandoned the finely executed work of earlier periods, which at times resembled paintings, in favor of more crude and broad execution of design.

As mosaics began to evolve into cruder forms, precluding mere imitation of design, a new kind of tesserae came into use. These were gold tesserae, the production of which consisted of placing gold leaf between two layers of glass. Good examples of Byzantine mosaic are to be found in the mosaic work in the Triumphal Arch and apse of St. Vitale at Ravenna.

Some of the most outstanding work of the Italian Byzantine mosaicists is to be found in the half-dome mo-

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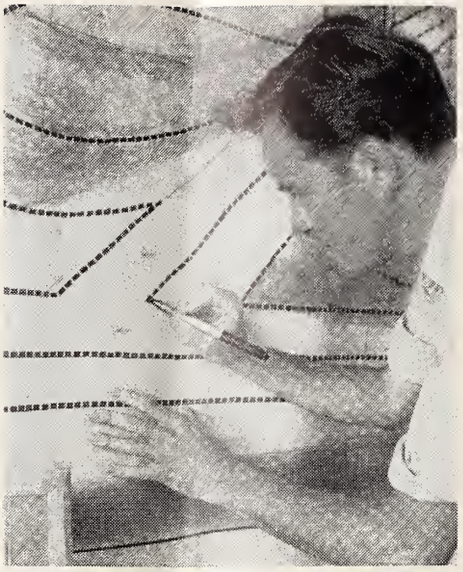
. . . MOSAICS

1. Joseph L. Young, a Los Angeles mosaicist, makes drawings, to scale, for his mural for the Police Facilities Building.



2. A full-scale sketch for the six-ton mural next is drawn on cartoon paper. This is the second step when using the indirect method.

3. Before the individual tessera are glued to the cartoon paper, Mr. Young cuts the large sketch into small sections.

saics of the apses of Roman basilicas. Beginning with the middle part of the thirteenth century, Byzantine mosaic began to decline until all traces of it disappeared. One of the major factors responsible was the emergence of the great Italian mural painters. However, in Constantinople as well as in Greece, mosaics continued to be used for church ornamentation until the fall of Constantinople.

It seems something of a contradiction that, with the advent of the Renaissance period, the art of mosaic should all but disappear. Titian did employ some mosaic work in St. Mark's at Venice but for the most part it was used mainly as an imitation of painting.

Although mosaic art seemed to die out during the Renaissance in Europe, it continued to flourish independently among the Aztecs of Mexico. Their ceremonial pieces and sacred structures were covered with precious turquoise, quartz, obsidian and mother of pearl. Out of these early traditions have come such contemporary masters as Juan O'Gorman, Carlos Merida, Diego Rivera and Chavez Morado . . . the men whose work in mosaic on the buildings of Mexico's University City has earned them international fame.

Modern day mosaic artists employ one of two general methods in making mosaics. In the first method, the tesserae are carefully put in place on the surface to be decorated. The second and more common method is for the artist first to draw on paper the general outline of the finished mosaic. The surface that he uses for this outline is actually the reverse side of the mosaic.

When the drawing is completed and the color scheme determined the artist cuts the paper into small individual sections which can be handled with ease. Then he begins the painstaking task of gluing each individual tessera into place on the heavy paper called cartoon pa-

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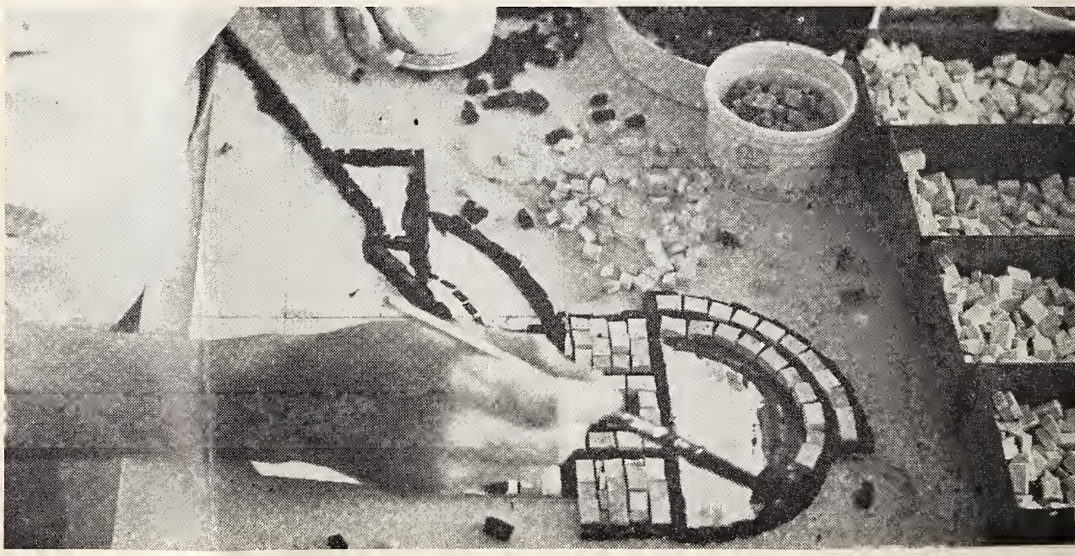
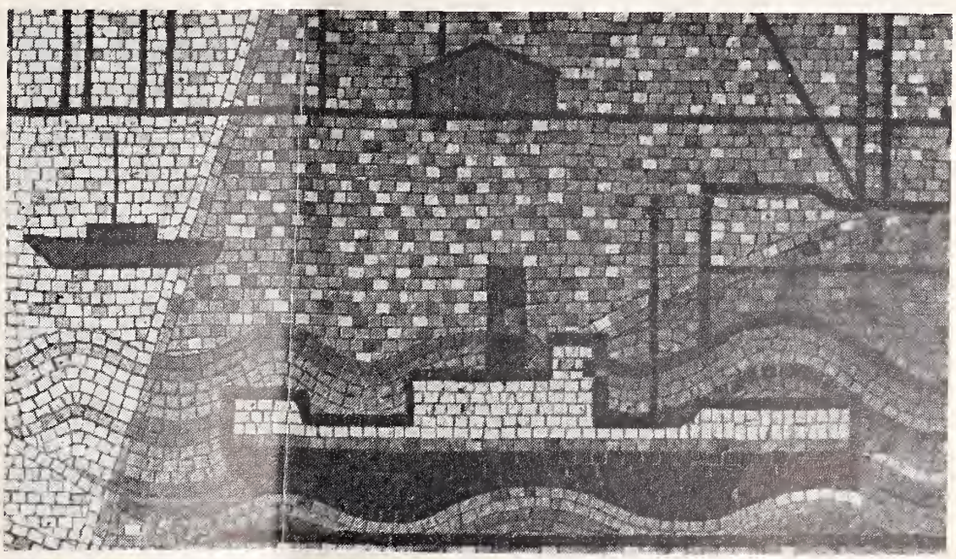
4. A steady hand is a must for the delicate job of cutting the tessera. He uses a traditional mosaic hammer for the job.



5. Mr. Young glues the glass tesserae to a section of cartoon paper. Notice how he provides bins for each color.

THE FINISHED MURAL which provides a division wall in the Los Angeles Police Facilities Building is suspended from columns to provide eye-level viewing. It took Mr. Young two years to complete the 36' x 6' mural.

6. The partially completed mural is spread out on a table in Mr. Young's workshop. Notice the detailed cartoon sections.



7. Mr. Young achieves a feeling of waves in the placement of the tiles, as shown in this close-up view of the mural.

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE employs the use of mosaic murals on the outside of buildings as well as the inside. Above is a section of mosaic on one of the buildings of the University of Mexico. Modern mosaics omit much of the intricate detail that was common in the early mosaics. Notice the detail in the dome of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (below) in Ravenna, Italy. This is an example of 5th century mosaic. Opposite is one of the rock-mosaic murals covering the University of Mexico Library. Executed by Juan O'Gorman, murals like these cover an acre of exterior walls of the library at University City, Mexico.

per). The various sections now are reassembled on the prepared surface, such as a wall, and held fast with cement. The tesserae are pressed into the cement while the front of them still is glued to the cartoon paper. After a relatively short period, during which time the cement has hardened sufficiently, the heavy cartoon paper is stripped of the face of the tesserae, revealing the completed mosaic. The joints are filled with cement and the entire mosaic surface is cleaned.

There are many contemporary artists worthy of mention. Charles Schlein, although not primarily a mosaic artist, has combined the art of mosaic with that of wood sculpture.

Perhaps one of the best known contemporary mosaicists of this century is Gino Severini. Shortly after the turn of the century, Severini journeyed to Paris where he painted alongside other notables such as Picasso, and Utrillo. Some of his mosaic masterpieces can be found in churches in Semsales, La Roche, Fribourg, and Lausanne. He has produced a number of other outstanding mosaics in public buildings in Italy and France. Severini believes that mosaic art will be instrumental in bringing back order, clarity and purity to art.

Another great contemporary mosaicist is Juan O'Gorman. Among his most outstanding work is his contribution in designing and executing the massive mosaics covering an acre of exterior walls of the library at University City, Mexico. His murals depict the rich history of Mexico and are alive with brilliant colors. O'Gorman worked with slabs one meter square, 4,000 in all, to achieve his monumental mosaic masterpiece.

Joseph L. Young, the mosaic artist featured in the film, *The World of Mosaic,* has completed several major mosaic commissions which show an extraordinary degree of achievement in this art medium. Mr. Young studied in Rome as well as in several American schools. The creation of one of his finest mosaics, the beautiful mural in the main lobby of the Los Angeles Police Facilities Building, is traced in the film from the first rough sketches on cartoon paper to the hand cutting of the tesserae and final installation. The gigantic mosaic mural was divided into many panels which were numbered and then assembled to form one huge mural mosaic of striking quality.

Measuring six feet high and 36 feet long, this six-ton work of mosaic art is the world's largest glass mosaic mural ever to be executed by an American artist. Mr. Young spent two years of concentrated effort to bring his work to fruition. This mosaic mural is the first to depart from conventional installation in wall or floor. By suspending the six-ton mosaic between two supporting columns, an attempt is made to provide eye-level viewing.

Although this article illustrates Joseph Young's method for making a massive mural, hobbyists can use the identical technique for making table tops, wall plaques and numerous other smaller mosaic projects. With mosaics becoming more and more popular in the home, and with mosaic supplies now easily available, hobbyists can take full advantage of this colorful and durable medium. •